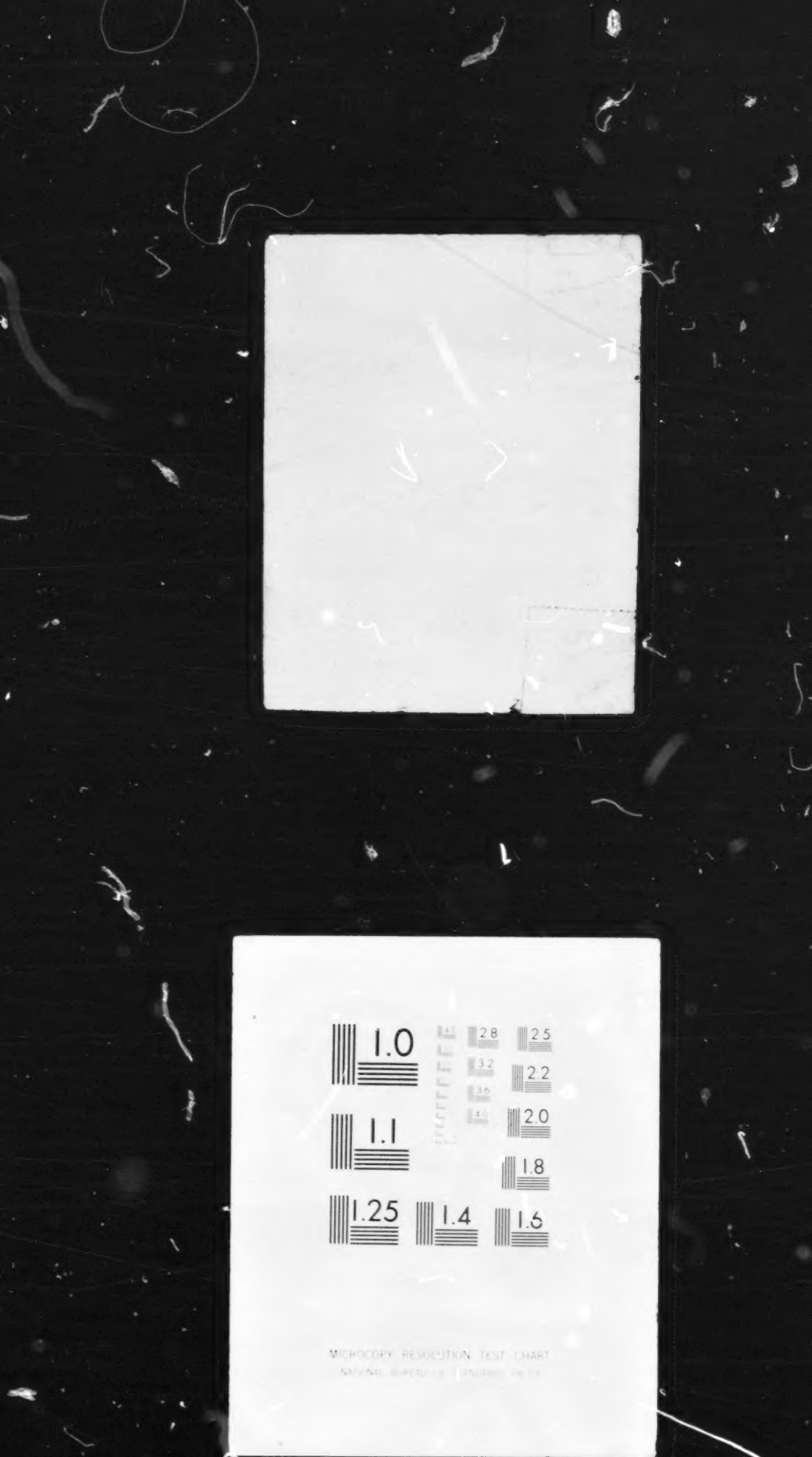
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ABSTRACT

The Talk-Write method of teaching college composition, developed by Robert Zoellner, can be adapted for use in secondary and upper elementary classrooms. The method, which focuses on the process of writing, involves teaming students in pairs. One student then talks out a composition, sentence by sentence, while the partner asks questions to draw out the talker/writer and to clarify confusing points of the narrative. The developing composition is written on the chalkboard or on a large piece of paper taped to the wall. When the composition is complete, the teammates exchange roles as talker/writer and questioner. During the process, students can walk around the room, viewing and commenting on each other's work. The effectiveness of the Talk-Write method is due to its employment of the principles of operant conditioning: concentration is on the student, rather than on the paper; the behavior leading to the final desired result is constantly reinforced; the talking student freely supplies the initial material for the learning sequence; the writer gets immediate help and reinforcement; there is a high frequency of response; there are numerous intermediate steps leading to the final specification; and the assigned task is brief. (GW)

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Getting It Out, Getting It Down: Adapting Zoellner's Talk-Write

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In 1969, College English devoted nearly an entire issue to Robert Zoellner's article, !Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition."[1] While Zoellner geared the article to the college teacher, its implications are equally appropriate to the secondary, middle school, and elementary teacher.

The primary impetus behind Zoellner's method is that nearly all students come to the classroom with talking skills far superior to their writing skills. These talking skills can help improve their writing. Composition teachers are aware that many students are very fluent using oral language, but for reasons that puzzle us, they find it difficult to write with the same fluency. We have all had the experience of reading a student-written paragraph and being totally incapable of deciphering just what is being said; upon questioning the student, the response is often immediate and quite clear orally. And we continue to be puzzled why seemingly clear thinking can change to mud as it is written on paper. It is this very process of breaking down "what I meant is..." that Zoellner deals with so effectively in his Talk-Write method.

Talk-Write concentrates on the process of writing, helping the students gain skill while writing, rather than concentrating on the product when the act is completed. Zoellner considers that dealing with the product instead of the writer results from the compositional theory which assumes if we can get the student to think clearly, s/he

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[1]Robert Zoellner, "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," College English, 30 (January 1969), 267-320.

can write clearly.[2] (Composition teachers continually write across student papers "order your thoughts better" or "cloudy thinking." And we have all experienced a student's catatonia after we have said, "Now Think!") Often students we consider bright do not write clearly at all; something misfires between the thought and the written words. Thought we can never really know since it is internal, but Talk-Write is external, uses audible speech, concrete student behavior.

Everybody knows how good it feels to "talk about it," and several studies also indicate that it does more than purge the soul. Talking during problem solving experiments helped the subjects:

> 1) see the problem more clearly, 2) develop greater problem-solving accuracy, 3) produce clearer ideas, 4) pay more attention to the goal, 5) be more highly conscious of the steps they took, 6) make sudden reorganizations to solve the problem (i.e. insight), and 7) see the basic puzzle relationsips.[3]

Since writing is basically problem solving (How can I say what I want to say most effectively?), it seems reasonable that talking before and during writing will produce clearer, better organized, perhaps even more interesting writing. And educators are becoming more aware that language study should be integrated; talking and writing should not be separate, but should be used to reinforce each other.[4]

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[2]Zoellner, p. 270.

[3]Terry Radcliffe, "Talk-Write Composition: A Theoretical Model Proposing the Use of Speech to Improve Writing," Research in the Teaching of English, 6 (Fall 1972), p. 189. Radcliffe is summarizing from three articles reporting research.

[4]If you don't believe us check Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 49; Janet Emig, The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971), p. 57; Stephen Judy, Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English (New York: Dood, Mead, 1975), p. 25; James Moffett, A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), pp. vi-vii.

The Talk-Write method is simple. Pair students into teams. (Three or more may be asigned to a team, but the larger the team the longer the process.) Give each team a felt tip pen and a section of butcher paper or newsprint pad taped to the wall. For those teachers with sufficient chalkboards, assign each team a section. Using chalkboards or large sheets of paper is important for the student to escape the 8½ x 11" white, lined cell. On the board or large paper, s/he is more apt to experiment, change words, erase or cross out what isn't liked, realizing that language is plastic and fluid, not monolithic and unchangeable.

One student of each team will begin as writer, the other as questioner. The writing student will talk out each sentence before writing. When the sentence is written the teammate may ask questions about it, serving as a clarifier and encourager--drawing out, but not supplying, content. The questioning helps the writer change confusing details or references and the questioner's positive cues keep the writer talking. When the composition is complete, it may have many sentences crossed out and changes in spelling, punctuation, or sentence and paragraph sequence, but it will say what the student intended. Next, the teammate takes a turn with his/her own piece of paper, using the same process.

An example of an assignment and the process of fulfilling it could begin with the teacher asking students for a memory writing (but it could just as easily be an expository writing):

> Think back to the places you have lived; now think of your favorite of those places; now think of your favorite room inside or spot outside that place; now describe that room or spot. Your composition should try to incorporate all of the senses. You might include what the room smelled like, how the lighting affected seeing in the room, what the texture of the floor felt like--all completely enough for us to reel we are in the room.

The teams will then go to their papers and begin. Pete may say to his teammate, "I want to write about when we lived in this big house that used to be a barn." To which Linda may reply, "A barn! Where was that?" "Oh, it was by this steep hill in Seattle." "What did you like so much about that barn-house?" "Well, it had these neat stairs." "What was so neat about the stairs?" "Well, they came out. They were built so they kinda swerved around." "I'm not sure what you mean. Like a circular stair?" "No, I mean they went up, then there was a wide place where they turned--I guess it's called a landing. Then they went up some more and we used to put an old army blanket across the railing and we'd play army games." "Who is 'we'?" "Oh, my brother and me." "Was he older or younger than you?" "Two years older." "Sounds good. Let's get this down." "Okay. I'll start with, 'I remember when I was seven and my brother was nine and we lived in a big house that used to be a barn." "Is it important to say where this house was?" "Yeah. I'll say it was by a steep hill in Seattle, and there was this one window that if you stretched up to it you could see over the top of the hill." "That's neat. Are you going to put that part about the window in your writing?" "Yeah, I'll say there was this small window up high in the stairwell and you could see over the top of the hill out the window. Oh, and the stairs were real dark cause we couldn't reach the socket to put a lightbulb in." "Are you going to put all that in one sentence?"

Pete writes down his ideas, reads them aloud, hears some unnecessary repetitions and clumsy sentence structures, rewrites and is satisfied with what he has thus far:

> When I was seven and my brother was nine, we lived in a big house that used to be a barn. It was by a steep hill in seattle and it had a small high window in the dark stairwell where you could see over the top of the hill.

After Linda points out that Seattle should be capitalized, she then elicits further information. "Looks good so far. Are you going to write about the stairs?" "Yeah. They were steep and the landing was about four feet square. We'd put this blanket up and pretend we were in jail. The railings on the stairs were the jail bars, ya know. And we'd sit under there and watch rain hitting that high window and we'd plan how we were going to escape out that window." "Okay, let's get some of this down. Your last sentence talked about the steep hill in Seattle and the high window and the dark stairs. What part of that are you going to write about next?" "I guess the stairs are the most important thing, so I'll pick up on them."

Pete talks out some more sentences, writes, reads aloud, then rewrites adding:

> The stairs were very steep and we used to play on them when it was raining. We strung a scratchy army blanket across the wood railings on the stair landing. We fastened the blanket with peaces of string on one side and a stack of old magazines on the other. The blanket was the ceiling of the enemy jail we were trapped in.

After reading/hearing it, Linda says, "I think you have the wrong 'pieces' there." After some snickering, they continue reading the final sentence aloud:

> We huddled on the musty floor of our prison and looked through the bars, watching the rain slide down the high window, and devised complex escape plans.

By the end of all this, the teacher, who has been working with other teams, arrives with words of encouragement. Also, s/he may ask

Pete why he ordered his writing as he did or why he included the details he did at the expense of others ("Why did you choose not to write more about the barn?"- to emphasize the enormous number of choices Pete has made, but s/he will avoid negative criticism, especially early in using Talk-Write.

Through the dialogue, the students use each other's strengths. Linda may know how to spell some words Pete can't; Pete may be terrific at punctuating. And by reading aloud, Pete and Linda often catch mistakes in construction they'd otherwise miss in silent reading. They also will become aware of the differences between speech and writing, better able to adapt their speech to make it more viable when written. And the students can keep their unique "voice," so often washed out in writing, as both their writing and speaking improve.[5]

Another Talk-Write benefit is writing becomes public, the classroom setup providing an audience for the writer. Each student working at the chalkboard, butcher paper, or newsprint is a model of the writing act for others. (Obviously, not all students' writing will be as sophisticated as Pete's, but his is a more reachable public model than E. B. White.) Students can walk around, reading and commenting on others' work, receiving "vicarious reinforcement" ("that which increases the probability that we will do what we see others doing successfully").[6] This public aspect gives the writer a stake in his/her writing; s/he is producing it for peers--not just for the teacher--and will write better and more interestingly.

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[5]Zoellner, p. 301.

[6]Ibid., p. 310. Zoellner is summarizing research by Frederick Kanfer.

In using the Talk-Write method for the first time, teachers frequently wonder about the ability of the student to act as a competent questioner. The teacher needn't become too concerned with the immediate proficiency of the questioner. Proficiency will improve with practice as both team members develop the ability to question. However, the class will benefit from an initial demonstration of how the writer/questioner dialogue works, either by the teacher and a student, or by two students already familiar with the method.

Talk-Write's simplicity is apparent. As Zoellner states, "The only good pedagogy, it seems to me, is one so simple that it can be applied with great effectiveness by the teacher who knows little or nothing about the theoretical structure from which it springs."[7] However, discussing some of the basis will help further explain why the method is effective.

The structure is based on operant conditioning, a subject we don't want to discuss thoroughly in this article, either to commend or condemn. Like most teachers we are pragmatic (we'll steal anything that works); we find Zoellner's technique useful, and see a lot of sense in his ideas about operant conditioning as he applies them to teaching writing.[8]

First, concentration is on the student in the writing process. Pete, not his paper, receives the attention. Second, Pete begins with skills he already has and builds on them; he is not forced to attempt to begin with skills he doesn't have. Talk-Write is positive; the student is successful because the behavior leading to the final

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[7] Zoellner, O. 302.

[8] Ibid., p. 278. The following section is based on seven principles of operant conditioning that Zoellner cites.

desired result--in this case a memory-sensory writing--is constantly reinforced, ultimately resulting in scribal fluency.

Third, the talking student freely supplies the initial material for the learning sequence. Linda lets Pete talk get loosened up, before saying, "Sounds good, Why not get that down?" Then her job is to keep it coming. Fourth, in Talk-Write the writer gets immediate help and reinforcement, not in the next week or even the next day. Often by the time the student gets a graded paper back, she/he has lost interest in or doesn't remember the assignment, doesn't read the comments at all, can't make the transfer from that writing to the current writing with its different set of scribal problems.

Fifth, Talk-Write technique provides for many oral and written responses, building on the theory that "all human skills are learned in high response-frequency situations."[9] We become adept by practicing units of the desired skill. A basketball player becomes proficient by practicing various parts of the game--shooting from different spots on the floor, dribbling, passing--not just by frequently playing pick-up games. One problem in some compositional pedagogies is the lack of enough intermediate steps leading to the final specification--scribal fluency, a "good" writing. Too much depends on trial and error with perhaps ten chances in the semester to write an acceptable essay. In Talk-Write each utterance is practice and the student has the opportunity for thousands of utterances, each helping to shape his/her writing skill. And because the utterances are the writer's own, s/he is making his/her own intermediate specifications, progressing at

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[9]Zoellner, p. 282.

rate, improving gradually.

Last, the shaping process and skill progression that occurs with Talk-Write works best when the writings are brief because students can get more practice and because the method is intense with the questioning, clarifying and instant rewriting, difficult to sustain over a long time period.

Talk-Write is not an exclusive method of teaching composition, but can be combined with others, such as beginning private writings. For an expository writing, students can use Talk-Write to get out the main points, discuss the best order, and write the first paragraph or so. Their writings can be left on the walls for other students to comment on. Then the authors can incorporate the other students' ideas into their papers as they work alone. Talk-Write also is a natural in helping students revise. ("Tell me what you meant here.") Whatever the method, it seems important to have a place for oral activity. In his article, Terry Radcliffe summarizes the results of studies citing the advantages speech has over writing. Speech produces more material in the same amount of time, more relevant ideas, more elaboration on those ideas, is "looser, less inhibited, richer, fuller, and more precise than writing."[10] Certainly it makes sense to use what the students do well--talk--to help them improve what they do not do as well--write. And middle schools, where students are such eager talkers, is an apt place to do it.

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[10]Radcliffe, p. 191. He is summarizing from four articles reporting research.